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The Story of Our Country Parish

IN CHINA.

Revised and Enlarged.

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THE STORY OF OUR COUNTRY PARISH IN CHINA.

THE province of Shantung is larger than England and Wales, and is supposed to contain twenty-nine million inhabitants. Shantung was the birthplace of the great Chinese sages, Confucius and Mencius, whose tombs are adorned with costly temples. T'ai Shan, or the Great Mountain, is also in this province, and is the point toward which thousands upon thousands of pilgrims make their way, every year, to climb the six hundred weary steps leading to the summit.

Our parish lies in the northwest corner of Shantung, near the boundary of the Chihli province, and stretches to an indefinite extent in all directions from the little village of P'ang Chia Chuang (pronounced P'ong Jea Jwong) as a center. About the year 1867 a few refugees, belonging to one of the many secret societies with which China is honeycombed, all of which are interdicted by the government, strayed into a chapel of the American Board at Tientsin, and invited the missionaries to visit their region. Their village was called "Number Seven," and lies on the bank of what is styled the "Grand Canal," but which

(at this point) is not a canal, and is not grand, being merely an old river. The people were poor ignorant, and suspicious. Many supposed that the foreign barbarian was plotting to seize the land and to overturn the government. Nearly every one was afraid of him.

For a long time there were no converts, but after two years two women were baptized. A few other women and girls were afterwards received, but it was five years before the first man was ready to accept the new faith, and even then the whole number of members was only eight, all but one of whom lived at "Number Seven." Although this could scarcely be considered an opening of special promise, in the course of ten years from the beginning the converts had increased to about forty, scattered in a dozen villages.

It was in the autumn of 1877 that the great famine threw its broad and baleful shadow across five extensive provinces of Northern China. Countless millions died from starvation and of disease. The great cities were overrun with refugees. They congregated at Peking and at Tientsin in immense numbers, and although fed to some extent by the authorities, they perished by the thousand. On a cold windy day in January a row of mat-sheds at Tientsin which was surrounded by a strong paling of stalks, and which was crowded with women and children, suddenly caught fire. The front gate was locked,

the gate keeper not to be found, and within the space of five minutes about 1,200 persons were either suffocated or roasted alive!

Urgent appeals were sent to Shanghai and elsewhere for funds with which to prosecute a famine relief work. Telegrams were sent to foreign lands, imploring help. But during the winter months navigation in Northern China is entirely suspended, and at that time there was no overland telegraph. Late in the winter, when funds began to be collected, they were intrusted mainly to the disposition of the missionaries (Roman Catholic and Protestant), the only foreigners speaking the language and willing to give their time and strength to the task of relief distribution, in which missionaries of all societies assisted.

In our parish the village of P'ang Chia Chuang was selected as the center of relief. Within six miles of this place there are by actual count 150 villages, containing at a moderate estimate 60,000 people. The population probably averages nearly 500 to the square mile, or about the same as in Belgium, the most densely populated country in Europe. The first relief was given only in villages where there were church members, because funds were low. Thus, these church members, instead of being as heretofore reviled and despised, became persons of great local importance, sought after from all quarters. "Without the needle the thread cannot enter,"

and these Christians suddenly found themselves in the position of needles, drawing after them the welcome thread of famine relief. As the funds increased the villages were taken in geographical order, from P'ang Chia Chuang outwards. Every village, and when practicable, every family, was inspected, to ascertain the real condition of the applicants. Each adult received only about a cent and a half *per diem*, and children under sixteen, half as much, yet this trifle was sufficient to support life. Doors hitherto closed were now gladly opened. It is not improbable that more Chinese homes were visited by missionaries, during the famine relief, than in all the seventy years previous, since Robert Morrison, the first missionary to China, landed in Canton. The famine relief was a gigantic advertisement and an object-lesson in practical Christianity. Benevolence is one of the "five constant virtues" in China, but it is rarely put in exercise, and in the deep distress of the famine year its very fountains seemed dried up. The Sunday services were attended by gradually increasing throngs, many in quest, no doubt, of loaves and fishes; yet some received the Word with gladness and with intelligence. In one village a whole yardful of women fell on their faces to do homage to the missionaries, whom they regarded as incarnations of Buddha, and at the close of Sunday preaching some would come forward and deposit a single cash as "incense money." Invitations

to preach — preliminary to requests for famine relief — were numerous, and so far as was practicable, were accepted. When the relief work closed in July about \$10,000 had been distributed in very small sums, in 117 villages, and more than 20,000 persons had been fed. This made an excellent background for the subsequent preaching of the gospel.

In one of these villages the keeper of a temple had been interested in Christianity previously, and now persuaded his fellow townsmen to remove the idols from one temple into another, and to use the empty building for a chapel. No harm having befallen the iconoclasts, either from gods or men, in the autumn the villagers mustered up sufficient courage to take the fifty or sixty idols out of the temples altogether and knock them in pieces, in quest of the lump of silver which is supposed to represent the heart. But as the silver turned out to be only pewter, their hearts were not found right. The fragments were carried out and buried "darkly at dead of night" in a gutter, where they were soon turned into what the villagers termed "divine mud," and never rose again. The platforms which had supported the images were made into tables for the scholars in a Christian school set up in the temple chapel, the frames of the idols were made into benches, the incense table served for a pulpit desk, and the bell was no longer beaten for idol worship, but for Christian meetings. The

two temple buildings, with the dwellings attached and all the land appertaining, were deeded to the "Jesus Church," and the temple keeper was made the chapel keeper, supported as before by the income of the land, although losing many valuable perquisites which he formerly received. Two years later, on occasion of a dispute over the validity of the gift, the original grant was formally confirmed, and the deeds of all the property were duly stamped at the district magistrate's office. Yet even after this singular and perhaps unique transfer, and in spite of the fact that the only other temple in the village has been destroyed, and that a Christian day-school was maintained for many years, the people of the village, taken as a whole, have never embraced Christianity. The only public idol remaining is a small shrine to the god of the soil, who is supposed to notify the Chinese Pluto when a death occurs. For many years this image was without any arms, and was likewise acephalous, but was still worshiped by most of the villagers just as if they had never maltreated their other divinities, and as if Christianity had never been heard of. Within a few months this god has been repaired, as the result of a vow, and seems destined for another lease of power. The death of the former temple keeper at this center has much weakened the strength of the Christians, but a volunteer Bible woman has been very diligent in her efforts to teach the other women, both

Christians and outsiders, and at present there are about seventeen women and girls in the village under regular Christian instruction.

In the autumn following the famine a new and wide-spread interest was manifested, and numbers applied for baptism. Within the next six months 150 were received to the church, and in the spring steps were taken toward opening in Shantung a new station. In 1880 two families and a single lady were appointed to this field. When they removed to their new home they were presented by the villagers with a huge lacquered tablet, with a complimentary inscription affirming that they "heal the world and illustrate virtue." The members of the church also presented the "Shepherds" with a tablet, and many other villages would have followed with a similar testimonial, as an expression of gratitude for famine and medical relief, if they had been suffered to do so. At a later period the "Shepherds" were offered a theatrical exhibition by the village, as the embodiment of the Chinese idea of the proper way to exhibit lofty respect! When this was declined (twelve villages having urged upon us a similar honor) each family in our village contributed the same amount which they would have given for the erection of a temple, and brought the sum to the "Shepherds," as their quota toward a new chapel, which they learned was much needed. This little nest-egg was accompanied by a mother,

the gift of a few poor Gilbert Island women in Honolulu, whose hearts were touched on hearing from Mrs. Bingham of the need of the small band of Chinese Christians in far-distant Shantung. It was many years, however, before in these nest-eggs the slow process of incubation was begun. When the Shantung Christians once roused themselves to vigorous efforts to build a chapel of their own, help flowed in from many unexpected quarters, the highest contribution being received from generous friends in Honolulu. The new building, which is about forty feet square, was completed in 1886, and is now provided with a fine bell, the gift of Father Porter.

Several other smaller chapels have been since built at the out-stations, with more or less help. One of these was completed during the past year, for which \$49 was contributed by native Christians. No buildings are rented either for Sunday meetings or for schools. The principle is now well established that a native church needs a place of meeting, and that as soon as they are in earnest in desiring and working for it, they will get it. In places where no separate building has been erected, meetings are held, as in the days of the apostles, in private houses.

Medical relief, prosecuted with regularity, has proved a far better introduction to the hearts of the people than even famine relief. Famines are happily exceptional, but the sick and the

poor we have always with us in great numbers. Scarcely a family in our village is not under obligations to us for medical treatment, and there is hardly a village for many miles around which has not sent its patients. Although our dispensary is situated in the midst of a country district, remote from any large city, the number of patients has been large, amounting in 1887 to more than 9,000, and in 1888 to about 17,500. The hospital patients in the latter year were 187, who remained an average of twelve days. The patients represent an area several hundred miles square, and come from more than twoscore counties in Shantung, and half as many more in Chihli. Much evangelistic work has been done among them, and great numbers of them have learned the Catechism, the Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. While it is often difficult to follow up patients in their homes, the good will which is won, the books which they buy, and the truths which they learn, cannot fail in due time to bear some fruit. Every mission dispensary and hospital is a conspicuous illustration, which practical Chinese cannot misunderstand, of the workings of Christianity. Many places have thus been opened for evangelistic work which would otherwise have remained closed.

A large part of the time of the ladies is devoted to village work, which has expanded to considerable proportions. Six villages are thus

regularly visited for the instruction of the women, and eight others occasionally, of which latter one (Kuan Chuang) is sixteen miles, and another (Ho Chia T'un) twenty-seven miles distant, each lying to the south. An incredible amount of patient labor has been lavished upon the teaching of these women. Chinese women cannot read, and their husbands regard them as too stupid to learn anything. They have never heard of laws of heredity by which a girl is as likely to inherit her father's capacity as a boy, nor would they believe in such laws if they were explained. But when they see a little maid, taught for a few months, able to recognize more characters in the Chinese Testament and hymn-book than her father, they are compelled to admit that girls can be taught. When thick-headed old women, half blind and almost deaf, are able (after several thousand trials and failures) to repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, several hymns, and all the verses which they have heard explained, and which are practically their whole Bible, they begin to secure respect, and still better, to respect themselves. Women from other villages are sometimes invited to the parish center, to study for a few days or weeks.

During the last winter and spring a series of five such station classes for women was held, at which seventy women and girls attended, representing twenty-eight villages, the pupils ranging

in age from eight years to eighty-eight. The total number of days of study was 1,030. The only thing furnished was food of a plain but substantial quality, and the result of careful supervision of the expense showed that even in a year when grain is exceptionally dear, it is possible to conduct a class of this description at a very trifling expense. The total cost was only \$26, or about two and a half cents a day for each pupil. The work accomplished was very satisfactory, many of the women learning the rudiments of Scripture truth as they never could have done in their distracted homes, and receiving a new and practical conception of the value and power of prayer. This period of study is frequently one of the happiest of their lives, and will be a joy in memory while they live.

Preaching at the large fairs held in the neighborhood is a most important part of our work. More than forty such fairs were attended last year. At some of them many thousand persons are present, and the interest and attention appear to increase from year to year. Those who are attracted by the preaching, or by a tract, know where they can receive further explanation. The number of those who thus gain some idea of Christianity must run into the thousands. Invitations to preach at villages are frequently received, and often open important avenues through which our influence may be extended. There are ten regular Sunday meetings, some

of which are always attended by helpers, and others are in part dependent upon local leaders.

Several native assistants have developed interesting Christian characters, often through great trials. One, who was a leader in several secret sects before embracing Christianity, was then regarded as a renegade, until the famine relief, when he became a local magnate, and was a pillar in the church, until his untimely death in December, 1886. He was a fine example of a Christianized Chinaman, and has left behind him a fragrant memory. Another, for years a stiff Confucianist, is now able to expound the gospel with great effectiveness to Confucian scholars. "It requires an elephant to capture elephants." A young man, who was first a Taoist and then a Buddhist temple keeper, forsook his calling, gave up all his living, studied at the Training School in T'ung Chou, and is now an efficient colporter. The number of native assistants is at present seven, besides three students in the Theological Seminary, who have not yet completed their studies.

There is no more apt illustration of the growth of the work in a "country parish" like ours than that of the seed which, being cast into the ground by the husbandman, grew secretly, he knew not how. It often happens that seeds which seem most likely to spring up have been dropped upon soil where there was no depth of earth,

while others from which little was hoped, bring forth much fruit. Of this truth, the village of Ho Chia T'un, already mentioned, is an example. A few years ago an ignorant and avaricious old man came as an "inquirer," hoping to gain something. From time to time he repeated his visits, on one occasion bringing a grandson and others whom he wished to make over to the "Shepherds" as a gift, doubtless hoping to secure for them a winter's support in a school. To one of these grandsons Christianity seemed as cold water to a thirsty soul, and having cast away the tangled web of superstition with which he had been bound, he was joyfully baptized, as well as four elder brothers, their aged mother, and many other members of their households. The young leader began a daily evening meeting in his own house, attended by many neighbors who spent their days weaving wicker baskets in cellars. In this way he explained the Lord's Prayer and other passages as well as he was able, frequently returning to the parish center, twenty-five miles distant, for more instruction to be dispersed in the same manner. Within a few months about forty persons had been baptized in this village, and other villages soon became accessible.

The class in China most hostile to missionaries is the official one. In our parish we have always been treated respectfully by the local authorities, except in one case where the magis-

trate of a neighboring district deliberately set himself to the task of driving us out. In this violent course he proceeded so far as to insult a United States Consul, and the contest terminated in the removal of the magistrate and his degradation. This occurrence, which took place just before the mission families removed to Shantung, exerted upon the contiguous officials a wholesome influence. One of them, having listened to a complaint regarding the introduction of Christianity within his jurisdiction, replied that as he did not wish to lose his official head, if any disturbance took place he should hold the complainants personally responsible — a decision which completely wilted their hostility.

Among the principal hindrances to the progress of the gospel in our parish are the extreme poverty of the people, which makes it hard for them to spare the time even to come and be cured of their diseases, and still harder to keep Sunday; the dense ignorance of most of the men and of all of the women; the prejudice against whatever comes from abroad; the selfishness which hopes to make a gain out of a new enterprise begun by foreigners; and especially the fact that ages upon ages of superstition and practical atheism seem to have obliterated the spiritual faculty, as the inscription is rusted from a long-buried coin, or the eye atrophied from the fish of the Mammoth Cave. It is for these reasons, that while many of our converts have

remained faithful, not a few have fallen away. The present membership is about 350, one third of whom are women. The population which must hear the gospel from us, if they are to hear it at all, is immense. The task of converting China is the most difficult which was ever intrusted to the Christian church. Will not American Christians, who live where there is a church for every few hundred people, earnestly pray for China, where there is but one missionary to half a million heathen?

A. H. S.

September, 1889.

Donations should be sent to LANGDON S. WARD, Treasurer. Copies of this leaflet for free distribution can be had by applying to C. E. SWETT, 1 Somerset Street, Boston, Mass.